

THE GOLDEN PAGODA

By Frank G. Carpenter.

How the Burmese Worship—Burning Away One's Sins—A Nation at Prayer—Life in the Monasteries—A Land Where Priests Only Have Souls—Every Boy a Monk—Buddhist Nuns and the Wickedness of Women—The Third Biggest Bell of the World—A Human Measuring Rod—Odd Features of a Strange Religion Believed by Millions.

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RANGOON, 1910.

Came with me this morning for a look at the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, the holiest shrine of the Buddhist religion. It is the mecca of one-tenth of mankind, and the nine million followers of the prophet who live here in Burma consider it the most sacred spot upon earth. The pagoda stands on a high hill on the banks of the Irrawadi river in this red-hot town of Rangoon. The sun here is deadly at noonday, and we get up with the crows. Their cawing begins before day, and the light is just coming through the palm trees as we sit down in the hotel bedrooms to our tea, food and jam before starting out.

A black turbaned Hindu with a red Indian pony carries us in his gharry through the wide streets of Rangoon. We pass half-naked coolies on their way to work; jostle the street water-carriers, consisting of bare-legged men, who, with buckets, are sprink-

dazzled by the blaze of gold upon it, and the wonderful structures which form its base. The sides of the hill are covered with carved buildings, each of which is a jewel, and a gorgeous covered avenue of gold, with a ridge roof upheld by white marble pillars, leads by stairways to the platform above. The platform itself covers fourteen acres, or as much space as the Pyramid of Cheops and it is from this that the gold spire starts.

But first let us make our way up through the arcades. There is no road on earth more curious than that which leads to the shrine. Its stone floor has throughout the ages been polished by the bare feet of the thousands who have tramped up to pray. The worshippers take off their sandals as they come to the entrance, and walk on with them in their hands. We foreigners keep our shoes on and mix with the crowd. As we go we hear the birds sing. Thousands of them have made nests in the carvings, and they fly back and forth through the arcades and about the pagoda from daylight to dark. At night they roost on the gold. According to the tenets of Buddhist religion, it is a sin to kill anything that has life, and the birds know they are in the house of their friends.

Burning Away One's Sins.

Going onward we pass booths all

wear the most delicate pinks, yellows and greens. The men have silk turbans as gay as a rainbow, and the whole is a kaleidoscope which makes the dark avenue a mass of bright hues.

Buddha's Golden Mountain.

But come out on the platform and look up at the pagoda. I despair of describing it. It is a mountain of gold which ends in a spire nearly 400 feet high. The stone platform where we are standing would make a half dozen blocks of one of our cities, and the monument alone has at the base a circumference of a quarter of a mile. That golden umbrella which you see on the spire looks small from this point. It is big enough to cover a good-sized house, and it is studded with jewels. Listen to the golden bells which hang around its rim tinkling in the breeze. The sound is mingled with the singing of birds and the rustling of palm leaves. That umbrella cost more than \$200,000 when it was made, something like a generation ago.

A Free Gift to Buddha.

This great structure and all its surroundings were formed by unforced gifts from the worshippers of Buddha. The labor upon it was voluntary, and when the king sent out notice that it was to be built, money and jewels flowed in to him from all part of Burma. The monument is kept up by the free-will offerings of the people. It has been plated with gold leaf again and again, until the brick and stucco of which it is made contain more of the precious metal than the best ore of our big western mines.

One of the last kings of Burma once made a vow that he would give his weight in gold to the monument. After he had taken a bath and scrubbed himself down to the lowest possi-

ent structure was already in place 100 years before Boston was founded.

Today the Buddhists consider it an almost sure passport to heaven to erect a small pagoda about the base of the great Shwe Dagon; and now there are hundreds of little temples, most exquisitely carved and often plated with gold running clear around the great monument. These are on the average, I should say, something like thirty feet high, ending in spires plated with gold. They are much like chapels, and inside each of them is a sitting statue of Buddha, often of more than life size. Some of these statues are gold plated, others are of silver, and not a few of alabaster or marble. They hug the base of the mighty pagoda.

The Third Biggest Bell of the World.

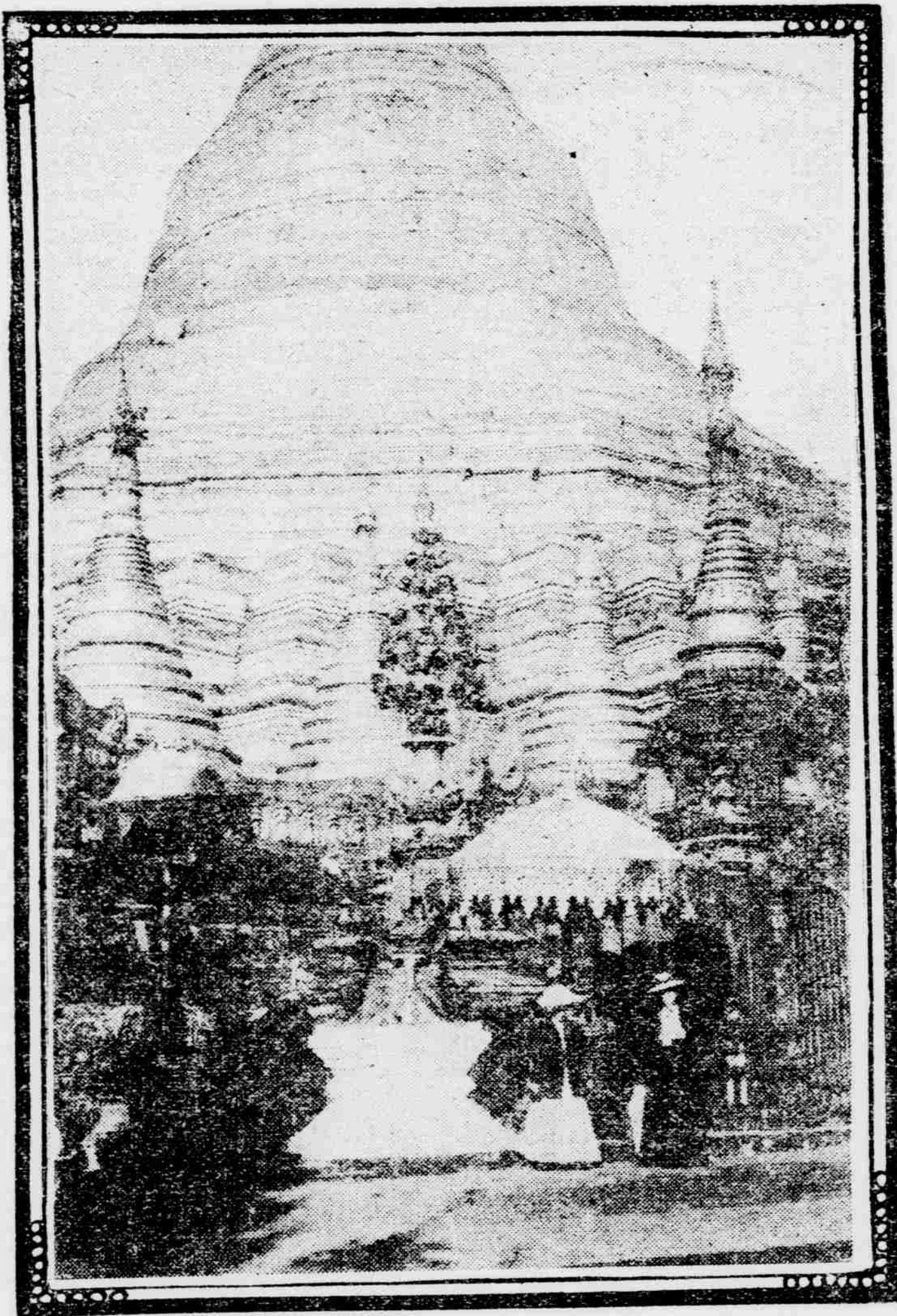
Round the edges of the platform, leaving a court several hundred feet wide between, are other temples of exquisite carving, some of which have reclining Buddhas a hundred or more feet in length, and at the back at one corner is the great Buddhist bell, which is said to be the third largest of its kind in the world. It weighs forty-two tons, and it would take something like eighty horses to haul it if it could be put upon wheels and dragged over the roads. It is so thick that the yellow-gowned priest who acts as my guide can just touch the inside of the rim with his fingers while the outside rests in the crook of his elbow. He strikes it with a deer horn and the sound booms out on the air.

This bell was presented to Buddha by a native king about seventy years ago. When the English took the country they decided to carry it off to London as a trophy. They got the bell down as far as the Irrawadi river, but in attempting to load it on a



ONE OF THE CHAPELS SHOWING THE CARVING.

"This is plated with gold and has a golden sitting Buddha inside,"—Mr. Carpenter at the right.



SHWE DAGON PAGODA.

"It is a mountain of carving, heavily plated with gold."

ble number of pounds, he jumped on one side of the scales and piled up gold on the other. It took just enough to make it cost him \$45,000. With the money more gold leaf was bought and the upper part of the pagoda received a fresh coat. I say fresh, but I doubt whether even then the new part could have been distinguished from the old. The whole mighty monument has hardly a tarnished spot on it. It is covered with gold, purer than that of an American gold eagle, and it shines like a new wedding ring. The lower part of the structure is much like a beehive. It is terraced around as it goes upward, growing smaller and smaller until it ends in the spire.

Eight Holy Hairs of the Prophet.

The monument stands over certain relics of Buddha, including eight hairs which the people pulled from his head, and gave to the two Burmese brothers who planted them here. That was many years ago, and since then the followers of Buddha have come here to worship. The first pagoda was erected on the site 588 years before Christ was born, and the pres-

vessel it fell into the stream and their engineers could not raise it again. Upon this, some Burmans came up and asked if they might have the bell if they could put it back in its place. The English, with a sneer, granted their request, having no idea that they could succeed. The Burmans went at once to work. They used no machinery, but by means of thousands of men working together they lifted the great mass up the banks and carried it back to where it now stands on Pagoda Hill.

Buddhists at Prayers.

But let us stroll around the pagoda platform and have a look at the people at prayers. All the worshipping is done in the open. There are scores of men, women and children kneeling on the bare bricks. Their hands are folded and they look up at the spire as they pray. They are not idolaters. They do not worship the spire nor the images, but come to this holy place to renew their vows, to think upon Buddha and repent of their sins. Their worship is real. See this way.

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the roads, turn out for the carts laden by humped bullocks carrying wags, and at last pass through a row of the bungalows in which the different classes of the city live, and are seated at the foot of Pagoda Hill.

Worship at the Shrine.

At five o'clock this bright Sunday morning, and the worshippers are at the shrine. Scores of brown-robed, sun-browned monks clad in robes of yellow cotton are seated in front of the rest houses on the hill. Each carries a beggar's bowl for the rice offerings which are given. We see scores of people on their way to the shrine, and in the entrance find peddlers of flowers, incense and candles offered to the gods overhead.

At last we reach the great pagoda long and low, five hundred feet above the sea where we got down from our gharry. With the hill upon which it stands the monument is as tall as the great marble shaft erected to Washington on the banks of the Potomac. As we look up we are

the way. Pretty Burmese girls with plugs of gold, silver or glass as big as my thumb in the lobes of their ears, sit cross-legged on the mats, selling offerings for Buddha. The candles are of all sizes, from tapers as thin as the finger of a two-year-old baby to great cylinders of wax as tall as the girls who are selling and as thick as their waists. I buy a bunch of the tapers and give them over to one of the worshippers. She smiles with delight at the thought of the sins that will be washed away as they burn, and thanks me profusely.

A little beyond this we are stopped by a priest with a nickel-in-the-slot box slung around his bare neck by a string. He has a little brass triangle tied to his right index finger, and he strikes upon this as he prays, making a sound like a bell. The passersby drop coins into the slot, and thereby acquire merit and prayers.

Upon reaching the top of the avenue, which is about one thousand feet long, we turn and look back upon the mass of bright colors. The Burmese